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Introduction to Culture

Culture is a complex term often used vaguely in everyday conversation. It refers to the common understanding and way of life developed through social interaction within a group, giving it identity and distinguishing it from others. Culture is dynamic, constantly evolving as elements are added, deleted, or rearranged. It includes both material and non-material aspects learned through family, school, and social institutions. Diverse natural and social settings lead to diverse cultures, each adapting uniquely to their environment.

Activity 1

How do you greet another person in your culture? Do you greet different kinds of persons differently? Discuss any awkward experience you may have had when you did not know

how to greet someone. Was it due to not sharing a common culture? How did you learn from that experience?

Exam Question

Q: Why is culture considered dynamic and never a finished product?

A: Because culture constantly changes as new elements are added, deleted, or rearranged through social interaction and adaptation to changing environments.

Natural Settings and Culture

Humans live in varied natural environments such as deserts, mountains, forests, and river valleys, as well as different social settings like villages, towns, and cities. These environments influence cultural adaptations in food habits, clothing, housing, and rituals. For example, desert communities use camels and nomadic lifestyles, mountain communities build insulated homes and wear heavy clothing, and riverine communities develop boat-based transportation and water-related festivals. Cultures cannot be ranked as superior or inferior but judged by their adequacy in coping with natural conditions.

Activity 2

Find out how the natural environment affects food habits, dwelling patterns, clothing, and worship practices in a region different from your own.

Exam Question

Q: How do natural environments influence cultural practices?

A: Natural environments shape how people live, what they wear, how they build homes, and their traditions, as cultures adapt to survive and thrive in their specific surroundings.

Defining Culture

Culture is often misunderstood as refined taste in arts or lifestyle of certain classes. Sociologists view culture as the total way of life shared by all members of a society, including knowledge, beliefs, customs, morals, laws, and habits acquired through social living. Early anthropologists like Edward Tylor defined culture as a complex whole including both material and non-material aspects. Later scholars like Malinowski emphasized inherited artifacts and values, while Clifford Geertz described culture as webs of significance spun by humans. Culture is learned, shared, and regulates behavior within groups.

Activity 3

Identify equivalents of the word culture in Indian languages and discuss the associations they carry.

Exam Question

Q: What is the sociological definition of culture?

A: Culture is the total way of life of a people, including knowledge, beliefs, customs, morals, laws, and habits acquired by members of society through social interaction.

Dimensions of Culture

Culture has three main dimensions:

- **Cognitive:** How people process and give meaning to information from their environment.
- **Normative:** Rules of conduct such as customs, laws, and social norms guiding behavior.
- **Material:** Physical objects, tools, technologies, and artifacts used in daily life.

These dimensions interact to form a functioning culture. For example, literacy affects cognitive culture, while laws and customs regulate normative culture. Material culture includes technologies that improve quality of life. Rapid technological changes can cause culture lag when non-material aspects do not keep pace.

Exam Question

Q: What are the three dimensions of culture?

A: Cognitive (mental processes), normative (rules and norms), and material (physical objects and technology).

Culture and Identity

Identity is shaped by social roles and group memberships. Individuals play multiple roles within family, kin groups, and society, each with specific responsibilities. Subcultures exist within larger cultures, distinguished by style, language, and practices, providing group identity and cohesion. Recognition and acceptance by others are important for identity formation. For example, youth clubs or women's groups create shared identities through common activities and language.

Activity 5

Are you aware of any sub-cultural group in your locality? How can you identify them?

Exam Question

Q: How do subcultures contribute to identity?

A: Subcultures provide a shared style, language, and practices that create a distinct group identity and cohesion within the larger culture.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to evaluate other cultures by the standards of one's own culture, often considering one's own culture superior. This attitude was evident during colonial times, such as in Macaulay's Minute on Education in India. Ethnocentrism contrasts with cosmopolitanism, which values cultural differences and promotes cultural exchange without judgment.

Exam Question

Q: What is ethnocentrism and how does it differ from cosmopolitanism?

A: Ethnocentrism judges other cultures by one's own cultural standards and sees them as inferior, while cosmopolitanism respects and values cultural differences and promotes exchange.

Cultural Change

Cultural change refers to the transformation of cultural patterns over time. It can be caused by internal factors like new farming methods or external factors such as conquest and colonization. Changes in environment, contact with other cultures, and technological innovations also drive cultural change. Change can be evolutionary (gradual) or revolutionary (rapid and radical), such as the French Revolution which transformed social values and structures. Media and technology have accelerated cultural change in recent times.

Exam Question

Q: What are the causes of cultural change?

A: Internal innovations, external contact, environmental changes, political intervention, and technological advances.

Socialisation

Socialisation is the lifelong process through which individuals learn and internalize the norms, values, behaviors, and social skills necessary to function in society. It begins at birth and is essential for developing self-awareness and social identity. Primary socialisation occurs in the family, while secondary socialisation happens in schools, peer groups, and other institutions. Socialisation is not passive; individuals actively engage and sometimes resist social norms, developing individuality and freedom.

Activity 6

Suggest ways in which the child of a domestic worker might feel different from the child whose family her mother works for. What might they share or exchange?

Exam Question

Q: What is socialisation and why is it important?

A: Socialisation is the process of learning social norms and behaviors, important for becoming a functioning member of society and developing self-identity.

Agencies of Socialisation

Key agencies of socialisation include:

- **Family:** Primary agent shaping early behavior and social position.
- **Peer Groups:** Friends of similar age providing egalitarian interaction and testing social rules.
- **Schools:** Formal education and hidden curriculum influencing social roles and norms.
- **Mass Media:** Television, print, and digital media exposing individuals to diverse experiences and information.
- **Other Groups:** Workplaces and community groups also contribute to socialisation.

Activity 7

Reflect on differences between your interactions with friends and those of your parents with their peers. How do roles and status explain these differences?

Exam Question

Q: Name some agencies of socialisation and their roles.

A: Family teaches early norms and roles; peer groups provide social interaction; schools impart formal and hidden curriculum; mass media exposes to wider culture; workplaces socialize adults.

Socialisation and Individual Freedom

While socialisation shapes personalities and behavior, it does not eliminate individuality or free will. Conflicts may arise between different socialising agencies, such as family and peer groups. Socialisation enables individuals to develop self-identity and independent thought, balancing conformity with personal freedom.

Exam Question

Q: Does socialisation reduce individual freedom?

A: No, socialisation shapes behavior but also enables development of self-identity and independent thought, allowing individual freedom.

Gendered Socialisation

Socialisation often differs by gender, influencing how boys and girls use public spaces and behave. For example, boys may freely use streets for play, while girls may be restricted due to safety concerns. Gendered norms affect roles, expectations, and freedoms within society.

Activity 11

Discuss the differences in normative culture between town and village, and how gender roles affect socialisation in these settings.

Exam Question

Q: How does socialisation differ by gender?

A: Boys and girls are socialised differently, with varying freedoms and expectations, often restricting girls' use of public spaces and activities.

Glossary

- **Cultural Evolutionism:** Theory that culture evolves through variation and natural selection.
- **Estates System:** Feudal European social ranking by occupation: nobility, clergy, and third estate.
- **Great Tradition:** Written cultural traits accepted by educated elites.
- **Little Tradition:** Oral cultural traits at village level.
- **Self-Image:** How a person is perceived by others.
- **Social Roles:** Rights and responsibilities linked to social status.
- **Socialisation:** Process of learning to become a member of society.
- **Subculture:** Group within a larger culture with distinct symbols and values.

Solved Examples

Example 1

Question: Explain how natural settings influence culture with examples.

Answer: Natural settings like deserts, mountains, and rivers shape cultural practices. For instance, desert dwellers use camels and have nomadic lifestyles to cope with scarce water. Mountain communities build insulated homes and wear heavy clothes to survive

cold. Riverine communities develop boat-based transport and water festivals. These adaptations show how environment influences culture.

Example 2

Question: What are the main agencies of socialisation and their roles?

Answer: Family is the primary agent teaching early norms and roles. Peer groups provide social interaction and testing of social rules. Schools impart formal education and hidden curriculum. Mass media exposes individuals to wider cultural experiences. Workplaces and community groups also contribute to socialisation.

Practice Set

Easy

- Define culture in your own words.
- List three dimensions of culture.
- What is socialisation?

Moderate

- Explain the difference between primary and secondary socialisation.
- Describe how natural environment affects cultural practices with examples.
- What is ethnocentrism? Give an example.

Challenging

- Discuss the impact of rapid technological change on culture and explain culture lag.
- Analyze how gender influences socialisation and public space usage.
- Compare and contrast the definitions of culture by Tylor and Malinowski.

Answer Key

Easy

- Culture is the shared way of life, including beliefs, customs, and behaviors, learned through social interaction.
- The three dimensions of culture are cognitive, normative, and material.
- Socialisation is the process of learning to become a member of society.

Moderate

- Primary socialisation occurs in the family during early childhood; secondary socialisation happens later in schools and other institutions.
- Natural environment influences culture by shaping food, clothing, housing, and rituals; e.g., desert nomads use camels, mountain people wear heavy clothes.
- Ethnocentrism is judging other cultures by one's own standards, often seeing them as inferior; e.g., colonial attitudes.

Challenging

- Rapid technological change can outpace changes in norms and values, causing culture lag where society struggles to adapt.
- Gender socialisation leads to different freedoms and roles; boys may have more public space access, girls may face restrictions.
- Tylor emphasized non-material culture like beliefs and customs; Malinowski included material artifacts and practical aspects learned through fieldwork.

Quick Reference

- **Culture:** Shared way of life including knowledge, beliefs, customs, and material objects.

- **Dimensions of Culture:** Cognitive (ideas), Normative (rules), Material (objects).
- **Socialisation:** Lifelong learning process to become a functioning member of society.
- **Ethnocentrism:** Judging other cultures by one's own cultural standards.
- **Culture Change:** Transformation of cultural patterns due to internal or external factors.
- **Agencies of Socialisation:** Family, peer groups, schools, media, workplaces.

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